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AUTHOR Steele, Stephen F.
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DEATH'S AFTERMATH: GROUP EMERGENCE IN EARLY GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

ABSTRACT

by

Stephen F. Steele
Instructor of Sociology
Anne Arundel Community College
Department of Social Science
Arnold, Maryland 21012

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In the days immediately following a death, forces of both the uniquely maintained emotions of grief and the socially couched bereavement patterns interact with the backdrop of the social groupings which comprised the sphere of family, friends and acquaintances as well as the society at large. It is with this interaction and the bereavement-related groups which emerge that this work will deal.

METHOD

Accessibility to this research role was achieved through participation as a member of an organization originated and designed to assist any bereaved individual: Bereavement Outreach Network (BON). In the formal role of Network worker, the researcher was to play the dual role of providing assistance as a "caregiver" while collecting valuable data from encounters with the bereaved. The sample was collected in a Midwestern community among what could only be described as a predominantly female, middle class sample. A portion of the analysis of this data follows.

BEREAVEMENT GROUP CATEGORIES

Bereavement is not a unidimensional situation. Generally, the roles which follow the emergence of these behavioral types appear related to at least two sources. One source is that of the family and friends of the deceased. The other, is that of the existing society.

THE GRIEVING INNER CORE

The inner core is at the hub of the bereavement situation. Generally, it may be thought of as the "family of the deceased", the "next of kin" or those "very close to the deceased". In essence, the group consists of family members and intimate friends. Roles to be played may be based on degrees of socially prescribed distance (for example, who is "closest" to the deceased - the daughter, the husband, wife or sister?). Sometimes formal structure may be accepted within the family. However, agreement is not necessarily arrived at in regard to this pattern of closeness and as a result "hard feelings" may emerge at a later time. In the typical family situation observed, a hierarchy of some kind will be established. The individuals within the group will decide who is "center stage" and thus who is expected to grieve most intensely. This person (or persons) will form the nucleus of the Grieving Inner Core.

The Inner Core is provided amnesty from normal social relationships. Thus, the "loan" of a husband from another family might be made for the purpose of performing some of the duties which under normal circumstances would be conducted by the deceased individual in a widow's family setting. Likewise, amnesty from the norms of physical contact may become apparent. Caresses which

usually convey the meaning of intimacy in a love relationship are used in this case to extend support and are offered without fear of reprisal from others.

Akin to the concept of amnesty are the factors of status and power afforded an inner-core member. Bereaved individuals vested with this power may use death (or their proximity to death) as a weapon. Bereaved telling the story of the death of a family partner command the immediate attention of sympathy of any others outside that group. In addition, when others impede the grieving process, display ignorance of the grief situation, or offer untimely or inappropriate remarks and/or acts; one's association with the death scenario may be pressed into service to clear this interference or communicate the gravity of the situation.

Inner core members expressed feelings of uniqueness and isolation (even isolation from other family members). Some of the factors which perpetuated this feeling were those commonly attributed to "communication problems". For example, differing degrees of family intimacy, age differences ("generation gap") as well as open or potential hostility provided impediments to overcoming the unique, lonely feeling of the grief experience.

Withholding feelings in a form of protecting others also adds to loneliness. Capsulizing role expectancies a widow said, "People want you to suffer and yet be strong as a brick". The implication

is that suffering serves as a sufficient sign for others that proper mourning is occurring, while simultaneously others are satisfactorily insulated from any personal pain. Consequently, hoarding of the emotional pain is expected and she must always be conscious of public vision - which may mean while being "all things to others" she is nothing to herself.

THE FUNCTIONAL OTHERS

Beyond the inner core a group emerges which fills functional "gaps" produced in the bereavement situation. These functional others are usually friends of the deceased or friends of his family. Occasionally, however, members of the kinship hierarchy may elect membership. One finds a certain commonality of interest in that the group members have every intention of actively filling the day-to-day needs of the grieving inner core. Though there is no apparent restriction as to who may participate in this group, there may be a rank ordering of members based on a "closeness" criterion. Though these individuals are on the periphery of the inner core, the "functional others" also may be involved in their own feelings of grief. Yet the members of this group take on a role unlike that of the grief-expected inner core. In the greater bereavement picture, these individuals are present, primarily "to keep the bereaved family going" - doing the grocery shopping, mowing the lawn,

bringing in a hot meal, or the like. In general, the functionals are available and willing to provide these services on cue from the bereaved or of their own volition.

Amnesty within this group is somewhat less potent than that granted the inner core. Very often members of the functional other group find themselves engaged in the "loan" relationship mentioned earlier in which they may perform the roles and the duties of a surrogate mother, father, son, daughter or friend of an inner core member. Furthermore, the members of this group may be provided special "time-off" from work or other special favors from formal organizations to participate in this role. However, the bargaining status of such an individual is clearly not as strong as that of a member of the grieving inner core. Working with borrowed power, the functional others, have no real need to become involved in protective behavior. Likewise, they have no reason to be particularly careful about "what they say" to others beyond the core in regard to the bereavement situation. They are in some cases the representative of the inner core capable of transmitting the desires of "core" members which may be inhibited by inner core role expectancies. A "functional" has the advantage of a certain degree of intimacy with the inner core but without the devastating power or the label of inner core membership. Thus, the inner core

may "live through" the functional others engaging in behavior which may not be socially condoned for the bereaved next of kin.

The functional others observed in this sample appeared completely absorbed by their role. As one woman mentioned, her involvement had been total to the degree that she felt "wooden" in terms of her personal affective responses. Inherent in the "woodenness" phenomenon is the feeling of involvement with a clear limit on the extent of one's influence. In other words, one may serve functionally but temporarily will not tread beyond, postponing expression of personal feelings until functional duties subside.

OCCASIONAL OTHERS

The "Occasional Others" are present to fill an obligation, to sign the guest register at the funeral home or an obligation to view the body of the deceased. Often these people are categorically more casual acquaintances or business associates. Generally, they have had no deep emotional ties to the inner core members. If they offer help to the bereaved they are more likely to make an openended offer without making specific purposeful statements ("If there's anything I can do...please let me know"). The implication is that they really would get involved if they were asked but such involvement without proper sanction would merely be unnecessary interference. Investment of time and emotion is minimal

as persons identifying with this group seek only momentarily involvement in ritualistic bereavement.

The intensity of this force of presence is difficult to gauge accurately, but it would appear that Occasional Others exert a great amount of social pressure on the members of the inner core. As one widow put it, "These are people who want you to act at death as though you were poised". Likewise they are the judgmental ones who state, "You held up beautifully". By their presence the occasional others encourage socially fabricated behavior on the part of the inner core. In so doing the occasional others set the basis for their own protective system of behavior.

THE GENERAL OTHERS

In the outer circle of intimacy is a group which comprises the general audience for the bereavement scenario - the "general others". (borrowed from Mead, 1934). The general others are those individuals who, though not present in any necessary degree of closeness, friendship or kinship, still act as a force for determining behavior. In this group are the unknown who comprise a silhouette of society. Borne in this group are the normative standards for conduct which are at all times present in any society.

What demands are exerted by the general others on the bereaved? In essence, a stereotype is carved. Perhaps from one standpoint

it is the image of the docile, melancholy, easily led individual. Yet, from another viewpoint it is an image which stimulates utter rejection on the part of the general others. Labels ("widow," "next of kin") are affixed by this group and interaction is tempered accordingly. Unlike the handicapped or the blind, the bereaved has no wheelchair, no leader dog to signal the coming of a social anomaly. It is the interaction of the core member with the greater society which extracts the grounds for stigma. Ultimately, the general other is responsible for maintaining traditional bereavement roles in the society at large. How the society reacts to the grieving and bereaved appears to temper the degree to which a sense of personal usefulness is regained or maintained. As one widow indicated:

> When you go to work you have to work, doing your daily chores as expected and you're expected to do this work without showing that you're hurting. You're expected to keep a pasted-on smile, go about your business never letting on (to the general public) that there is anything wrong.

This statement combines a certain anger and frustration at the social role which others impose.

MARGINAL OTHERS

A clear distinction between group boundaries does not always exist. Thus, group identification is often ambiguous and

expectancies seem cloudy. Sometimes the pressure for identification with more than one group yields contradictory expectations which afford marginal membership in the group of concern.

Marginality (Park, 1928) exists for at least three possible sets of conditions. The first condition is the situation in which an individual wishes to become a member of the inner core, but in which members of the group do not desire his presence. Consequently, conflict between personal interests and group interests may develop. Obviously (and in the second condition), the converse of this is true. When an individual is asked or expected to be a member of a more intimate group and he does not wish to make such an identification but rather wishes to remain a member of a more distant group; a lack of clear expectancies may result. At this point "core" status may be applied to bring the individual into the group. The third possible situation occurs when mutual agreement exists between a person and an intimate group that he should be afforded group membership but the marginal person does not have the experiential or associational marking for that group. An ambiguous situation develops when groups more or less intimate determine his presence to be abnormal..

As far as amnesty and power are concerned, the marginal others glean little power from their status. Likewise, their amnesty is

confused. The individual who grieves, while others identify him as a functional other, may be brought to task as to why he is not doing his "share" of the work. Likewise, those who have been accepted by the inner core members who are not afforded inner core status by the general others (for example), and who have been doing rather intense personal grief work, may not be given even the short bereavement period allotted inner core members to "recover". Essentially marginality may contribute to an unstable situation in which working through personal grief may be greatly inhibited. In a sense, marginal others may be "hidden casualties" of the bereavement situation.

CONCLUSION

The bereavement situation is an amorphous one exemplified by the complexity generated by group identification and personal emotional needs. The group framework derived from this research is offered as an effort to provide some order to an area which is likely to go unexplored.

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